

Q & A with Donna Siegel: Looking forward to the road ahead

published by mhapro on Tue, 07/05/2011 - 10:38



In her own words, Donna Siegel may be 71 in calendar years, but calculating her age as miles traveled during rotations of the earth around the sun each year, she proudly claims an impressive 48 billion miles traveled through the end of this year. She says her philosophy for any age is, “Inevitable life changes are just challenges or benefits to be capitalized on. Challenge and change enrich my life, test my metal and inform my soul. I welcome the testing.”

Siegel attended the University of Texas where she completed graduate school in social work. Immediately after graduation, she went to work as an AFDC caseworker (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) in Santa Barbara County in California. She later took a position with Texas State Child Protective Services.

She married Jerry, an Air Force pilot and gave birth to three children. While the family experienced multiple moves during Jerry's military career, her organizational skills found expression in active volunteering, serving on boards and taking leadership roles with organizations such as Girl Scouts, PTAs, the American Association of University Women, the George Air Force Base Officer's Wives Club and the Assistance League of Victor Valley.

In 1982, she began working with the March of Dimes, which immediately became a great passion. She retired 23 years later, having served as a director and manager at the regional, state and national levels. Working one on one with the volunteers in the Victor Valley was always her greatest joy with March of Dimes.

She has now found new passion serving on the Foundation Board of the Lewis Center for Educational Research.

She said the great annoyance of her life is that she's a terminally analog person living in a digital world. She struggles on a daily basis to reach a friendlier relationship with her computer.

But fortunately, she says, she loves to laugh, especially at herself often.

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Q: Describe a special memory you have of Apple Valley.

A: There are many! How could there not be? We've lived here 40 years. But the memory I fondly hold closely is our joy in purchasing our first home in the U.S in Apple Valley and becoming a member of the community. Why Apple Valley? Our research assured us that Apple Valley was a serene and safe environment for our family. The schools were tops in the Victor Valley. The inhabitants were friendly and welcoming, including the resident celebrities.

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Q: What do you do in your free time?

A: It appears that I work at ensuring I have no free time. That's a bit of an exaggeration, but closer to the truth than I realized until I had this question posed to me.

However, I am not all work-no play. I make every effort to use my season tickets for the TAG performances at the High Desert Center For the Arts. On occasion you will find me volunteering behind the snack bar selling and serving up refreshments or selling opportunity tickets before the curtain goes up and at intermission.

As a daily routine, I make time for and enjoy giving our two Australian Cattle Dogs vigorous playtime. It's also exercise for me and a welcomed break from computer bondage.

Riding my bike, just after dawn or just prior to sunset, is probably my favorite free time activity. One important caveat: I'm not one for excessive discomfort, no masochist here. I ride only when the weather is not too extreme.

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Q: Tell us one thing that most people don't know about you.

A: After a stint as a "soccer mom" for my children, I became a soccer player. During our four years in England, I yearned to play myself. It was not until we settled into our home in Apple Valley that this became possible. The first soccer league for women was being organized in

Apple Valley and our older daughter was eager to join. I went along with her to the sign-up meeting.

There were many of teens and 20-to-30ish women signing up. Gathering my courage, I approached the registration desk. “Do you have a geriatric team for this 48 year old?”, I asked.

After the laughter subsided, I received the answer that “Yes” there was a place for me in the league. And I was assured that I wasn’t the only “more seasoned” woman who would be playing. There were two of us, as it turned out. I loved the game. I held my own quite well, much to the surprise of a few very much younger forwards on the opposing teams. I played as a guard for 6 years.

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Q: What is your passion?

A: Spoiling our 11-year-old grandchild, Andrew. He lives in Virginia so the conversations and spoiling are via cell phone, email and UPS. I could carry on at length, reporting his many accomplishments in academics and sports. Breathe a sigh of relief here, for you are spared my carrying on. This is my gift to you for reading even this far.

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Q: What person, living or from history, would you most like to have dinner with and why?

A: Margaret Tobin Brown, a survivor of the Titanic. I have, since my teens, been fascinated with the stories of women who stepped outside the constraints and narrow boundaries prescribed by the social norms of their time.

I had seen the movie “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” in my teens. Loved every minute of it. But in doing some research, I discovered the degree to which the movie, as well as the earlier stage musical, had taken “artistic license” in depicting Margaret as a boisterous mining camp “girlie”, a log cabin resident who on the accidental discovery of gold, rose from rags to riches. She was depicted as uneducated, uncouth and a social climber rejected by the “old money” of Denver society but was adored in Europe for the same unseemly actions.

The real story, the truth of Margaret Brown, is one of courage in times of crisis, generosity when she saw a need unmet, dedication to changing social injustices, an indomitable spirit, a lifelong acquirer of knowledge, a lover of theater, music and dance. She ran for U.S. Congress before women were given the vote. She was awarded the French Legion of Honor for her service to France during World War I. She had been an ambulance driver stationed just beyond the lines of battle; she helped repair the ambulances; and she led the other women volunteers in this effort. She and the other women helped provide the devastated French villages with food and livestock.

And, she gained great notoriety, of course, in her role as a brave survivor of the Titanic who helped the other passengers, especially the poor Europeans from steerage who spoke no English. Margaret spoke many languages and was immediately asked by the Captain of the rescue ship, Carpathia, to help these immigrants who had lost all their worldly goods. She did.

I would relish being reincarnated as Margaret!

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Q: Who is someone who had a big influence on your life?

A: My father was the most influential person in my life in my formative years.

He taught me that material wealth does not make one special or a good person. It is not what you have that's important; it is what you contribute of yourself to your family and the community that makes you special. He contributed to my love of musicals and operatic music. He taught me bravery in the face of possible harm. He taught me the value of volunteering. During seasonal tornado watch, he spent hours night after night as a Disaster Preparedness volunteer following the tornadoes that came too close and reporting back to central control.

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Q: Describe your worldview.

A: From my perspective: The world, every nation, faces a palpable threat from an element of radicals who seek to impose their cruel religious and social norms throughout the world. They must not and will not win the fight but losses in human life and property will continue to be horrific.

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Q: What is your favorite quotation?

A: "Indulge your curiosity and life becomes exponentially more interesting." — Dr. J. Jeanne Garrison

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Q: Tell us about your faith

A: I believe that to be a whole person and unafraid to face the challenges in life, one must trust, have confidence in, and rely on a resource outside of ourselves. This resource is ever present, can be called on for guidance, comfort, and confidence to choose the right path to follow, a path that that leads one to be caring and compassionate to the needs of others.

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Q: What words of advice do you have for the next generation?

A: Don't fear failure! Failure is only a lesson for success.

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Q: Tell us about the charities that are close to your heart and why.

A: Not a charity but a not-for-profit charter school, the Lewis Center for Educational Research has been in my heart for more than 25 years. More precisely, since Founder and CEO Rick Piercy presented his vision for this extraordinary school to the members of Assistance League of Victor Valley.

I am an unabashed devotee of the Academy for Academic Excellence.

I could fill an entire copy of the Apple Valley Review with the forward thinking, exciting and new ideas for education emanating from LCER. I would be remiss if I did not invite every community member to our inaugural "Art in Science — Science in Art", Best In Show event on Sept. 17. Professional and amateur artists, all ages, are welcomed. More information can be found at www.lewiscenter.org/art_show.php.

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Q: What's your favorite sports team and why?

A: USA Women's Olympic Soccer Team. Undeniably, I don't spend a lot of time watching the "sport of the season" on TV or in the stands, with one exception: professional golf. In our household, golf is omnipotent.

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Q: What is something you are particularly proud of?

A: Climbing Mt. Whitney to celebrate my 50th birthday. I stood on the summit at just under 15,000 feet and felt the angel's wings in the gusting wind. The panoramic view was breathtaking. An experienced climber of Mt. Whitney pointed out Mt. San Geronio. My first attempt had ended in oxygen deprivation at 12,000 feet. To succeed was glorious! Needless to say, I purchased a t-shirt showing the trail and terrain of the climb to the top. I still have that shirt today.

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Q: What's your favorite movie and why?

A: "Phantom of the Opera" The music is so powerful one has a very visceral response to the pulsing rhythms; the lyrics of the arias pull the audience into the character's minds and hearts. The classic battle of good versus evil creates such tension; one is pulled into the characters' minds and hearts.

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Q: Tell us about your favorite thing about Apple Valley.

A: That I can boast to the poor souls occupying the great L.A. basin that "where I live" will become beachfront property when the San Andreas Fault really pushes the Richter scale off the charts. The not-so-cheeky, real answer is that I am in awe of the stark beauty of the desert and totally in love with the beauty of the San Bernardino Mountains, especially when capped with snow.

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Q: What is the best thing about your job?

A: The short answer is: I'm retired! I retired from the March of Dimes after 23 years of near 24/7 activity. Because of my position with the March of Dimes, I was able to arrange tours at the Salk Institute in La Jolla for key volunteers and board members. I was as excited as a rock star fan when I met the great Jonas Salk, the developer of the polio vaccine. On another occasion, our group had a brief encounter with Dr. Francis Crick who shared a Nobel Prize for discovering the structure of DNA .

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Q: What book had a significant impact on you?

A: "Half The Sky" by husband and wife team Nicolus Krestof and Sheryl WuDunn. They lay out a case for why empowering women in the developing world is both morally right and strategically imperative. The essential message is that lifting women lifts the world. I totally agree and wonder if their premise might not be relative to the U.S.

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Q: Tell us about a special vacation.

A: The most memorable and exotic of vacations occurred in 1991. This three-week African safari took us into Kenya and Tanzania. The group of 10 was led by VVC Anthropologist Lee Kinney who had, prior to our trip, spent quite some time at the early man site, Olduvai, where Louis Leakey had made international news with the discovery of "Lucy", earliest forbearer of modern man, ever found to date.

We were able to dig around the site, open by special arrangement, but found no "Larry" to hang with "Lucy" in the museum in Nairobi.

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Q: What makes you tick?

A: Challenge. No doubt about it, I love a good challenge. I thrive when I have a worthy challenge. And, in all honesty, when I am in between challenges I become less productive and use my time rather inefficiently.

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Q: Tell us about one thing you want to accomplish in life.

A: The operative word here is “want.” I have such a desire to see a complete reform of the welfare programs or entitlements as they are referred to now. I know the original and truly-worthy goal was to help provide basic needs to those who have no resources or ability to provide for themselves. The intent then was set into action programs to mentor, guide and encourage those being helped to work toward their own self-sufficiency. The plan was sufficiently clear in the direction it was to take. However, the actual application of the plan has, from the beginning, fallen catastrophically short of the goal. Oversight has been close to non-existent. We have a nation with a rapidly-growing populace of dependents. The fraudulent use of the funds is rampant at state and national levels.

Unfortunately, I am not a Joan of Arc personality nor inclined to be out front politically.

So until a Joan (or John) of Arc takes up the cause, there is no change.

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Q: What’s your favorite place to eat in the High Desert?

A: I’ve never been one to have only one favorite of anything. I disregard the dictionary definition of “favorite”. I have competing favorites in just about any category you might present. For special occasions, I’m most likely to choose either Outback Steakhouse or Daikoku.

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Q: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

A: Enjoying the adventure of zip line travel over the canopy of the Costa Rican rain forest. My dream would be to climb Half Dome in Yosemite. Reality, now setting in, is I probably will just take my grandson there to fulfill my part of our “pinky-swear” to go together.

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Q: What’s your favorite guilty pleasure?

A: Shopping at Chico’s followed by lingering over a basket of fresh strawberries, a bowl of rich whipped cream, and a bowl of liquid dark chocolate for dipping. Totally sensuous and sinful!

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Q: Tell us about a happy memory in your first car.

A: It was an Army Jeep painted Army green. I was the envy of the teen crowd that gathered almost every day after school at the H&R Root Beer stand, with waitresses on skates. I always laughed at the sign saying “Seating for 1,200 inside. 12 at a time.” Not so long ago I saw a revival ’50s H&R Root Beer stand with the waitresses on skates, and the same sign. What a “Back To The Future” moment.

Who would you like to see profiled in an upcoming Q&A? Drop us a line at News@AppleValley-Review.com.